Sympathetic distrust

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Published in:
EPRINTS-BOOK-TITLE

SYMPATHETIC DISTRUST: CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE SEXUAL AUTONOMY OF WOMEN[1]

Paper presented at the Workshop Multiculturalism and Human Rights
University of Toronto, April 27 2007; also presented at a meeting of the Culture, Gender and Health Research Unit of the School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, May 4 2007.

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An increasing number of feminists agree with Susan Moller Okin's claim that multiculturalism is 'bad for women' (Okin 1998; 1999), because it locks them up within the confines of their traditional, often patriarchal communities and hands them over to the power of the men within that community. Okin was the first in a long line of Western authors who questioned the feminist credentials of multiculturalism.[2] One of them is a former Dutch politician, Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Her fierce denunciations of Islam and of relativistic multiculturalism, as well as her praise of the blessings of Western liberalism made her into one of the most admired and despised public figures in the Netherlands.[3] In 2004, she made a short film, *Submission Part I*, which vehemently denounced the oppression of Muslim women as purportedly legitimized by the Koran. When shortly afterwards its director Theo van Gogh was murdered by an Islamic fundamentalist, Hirsi Ali was caught in the spotlights of the international media. In the summer of 2006, she left the Netherlands in order to take up a position at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington think-tank. The recent publication of her autobiography *Infidel* and the announcement of her next book, *Shortcut to Enlightenment*, indicate that she is determined to continue her 'jihad' (see Hirsi Ali and Wilders 2003) against the mysogynous views of a fundamentalist Islam that wishes to curb all expressions of autonomous female sexuality.[4] She is convinced that women are much better off with Western liberal views on gender relationships and sexuality, because they are based on the values of equality and individual autonomy. By doing so, Hirsi Ali has firmly inscribed herself in the tradition of liberal feminism.

Some decades ago, feminists fought a different ideological battle over female sexuality. The battleground then was located in the domains of pornography and prostitution. Liberal feminists took issue with the radical feminist standpoint which denounced pornography and prostitution as forms of sexual slavery that were degrading for women. The liberals argued that feminists, rather than supporting the conservative and puritan rejection of such practices, should conceive them as legitimate forms of work on condition that women engaged in them voluntarily. To present pornstars and prostitutes as victims only reaffirmed the traditional opposition between 'bad' and 'good' women, as well as the so-called madonna-whore complex which had a detrimental effect on the sexual liberty of all women. Prostitutes therefore deserved to be recognized as strong women who by capitalizing their bodies proved

their sexual autononomy.[5] In the Netherlands, this liberal feminist standpoint gained significant influence. Policymakers and politicians became convinced that the legalization of prostitution would both improve the position of voluntary 'sex workers' and enable the authorities to better combat forced and illegal prostitution. As a consequence, since 2000, the ban on the prohibition of brothels in the Netherlands has been lifted, and prostitution has become an officially recognized profession.

The question is: to what extent are women indeed better off with a liberal view of gender relationships and female sexual autonomy? Should public policies indeed be guided by the unconditional respect for the autonomy of (adult) citizens, or might it be wiser concerning some practices to consider a more paternalistic approach? These questions will be addressed by a comparison between two recent debates, i.e. the debate on the position of Muslim women, and the debate on the legal and moral status of prostitution. The focus will be on the Netherlands, but the issues are of current interest in all Western societies. The position of Muslim women and of prostitutes are usually considered to refer to entirely different issues: the first addresses the complicated relationship between feminism and multiculturalism, the second touches upon the sensitive issue of the relationship between feminism and conceptions of sexuality – where in both cases feminism is understood as intrinsic part of the Western legacy of liberalism. However, divergent topics such as (female) virginity, forced or arranged marriage, female genital mutilation, the headscarf, double sexual standards, the madonna-whore complex and the recent complaints about the pornographisation of popular culture all seem to revolve around the same issue, that of female sexual autonomy. In order to answer the central question, the paper will start with some conceptual clarification by drawing a distinction between moral, ethical and personal autonomy and the ensuing interpretations of liberalism as a political philosophy (1), and discuss shortly the contested relation between the ideals of autonomy and equality within feminist theory (2). The second part of the paper focuses on the interpretation of autonomy and liberalism as defended by Ayaan Hirsi Ali in her plea for the liberation of Muslim women. Her radical view of liberalism as the only reasonable comprehensive doctrine, and of personal autonomy as the only road to human flourishing, is criticized for its illiberal implications (2). Nevertheless, regarding some practices, i.e. those that one has good reasons to suspect that they are harmful to the women involved, Hirsi Ali's attitude of sympathetic distrust deserves to be taken seriously (3). In the third part of the paper, this perspective will be used to assess anew the old controversy between liberal and radical feminists over prostitution(4). It will be concluded that, if we accept that what counts as an autonomous choice is not always and entirely up to the judgement of the subject of choice, (sexual) autonomy cannot be a sufficient criterion for deciding about the best public approach to the position of women within either Islam or the sex industry. In order to develop a consistent and tenable political position, liberals need to break with the doctrine of the priority of the right over the good, and initiate public discussions about what count as reasonable (and unreasonable) conceptions of the good of sexuality (5).

1. Liberalism and autonomy

The political philosophy of liberalism starts from two basic values: the harm principle and the principle of autonomy. John Stuart Mill aptly captured both in a single formula: 'The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it' (Mill 1972: 75). In contemporary political and moral philosophy, autonomy is an essentially contested and multi-layered concept. All definitions or classifications of forms or levels of autonomy are based on and have repercussions for a particular interpretation of liberalism as a political theory. In its most literal sense, autonomy means self (*auto*) rule (*nomos*), or self-government. According to Gerald Dworkin, by exercising autonomy, 'persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are' (Dworkin 1988: 20). In this paper I distinguish three forms of autonomy.

1.1 Moral autonomy

The first form of autonomy is *moral* autonomy: the capacity to set oneself and obey universal laws. It is the will and the capacity to obey principles that one acknowledges as binding for all, that one consents to as self-imposed obligations. Following one of the formulations of the categorical Imperative, this Kantian interpretation of autonomy requires that one acknowledges the dignity of each human being as an end in itself. A person is morally autonomous in this sense 'when he is not guided just by his own conception of happiness, but by a unversalized concern for the ends of all rational persons' (Waldron 2005: 307). This interpretation of moral autonomy overlaps to a considerable extent with what Rawls, in his exposition of political liberalism, has termed 'political' or 'full autonomy' (Rawls 1993: 77-78). Persons are fully autonomous when they perceive themselves and others as free and equal citizens of a well-ordered society. This is understood as a public conception of identity, which remains unaffected by any (change in the) personal, nonpolitical commitment or aim of citizens (1993: 30). Moral autonomy is intrinsically linked with Rawls's principle of the priority of the right over the good. It presupposes a sense of justice, and addresses the practical question: how should one act in relation to others? Putting moral or political autonomy first produces a 'thin' version of liberalism, according to which a liberal society is radically tolerant vis-à-vis the comprehensive doctrines citizens adhere to as persons. Even if these are doctrines that require individuals to submit to a higher (say, religious) authority, they are considered 'reasonable' and hence permissible so long as they are coherent with the principles of justice as fairness. Political liberalism prescribes that the state should remain neutral in this respect. However, Rawls admits that state neutrality regarding personal aims does not amount to neutrality of effect: political liberalism will inevitably be less hospitable to some life forms, however reasonable, than to others. But this is not a matter of injustice, it is rather a tragic fact of human life. Referring to Berlin, Rawls reminds us that 'there is no social world without loss' (1993: 197).

Will Kymlicka disagrees. The privileging of certain life forms over others is not merely a contingent, empirical effect of political liberalism, it is a conceptual implication of it. By embracing moral (i.e. political) autonomy, including civil rights such as freedom of opinion, speech and religion, the liberal state makes it clear that, as citizens, individuals are free to critically explore different views and commitments, including their own, and that they may change them if they wish to do so. Through state institutions and regulations, such as free public education for both sexes, subsidy for day care centers or the legalization of gay marriage, this message will inevitably 'spill over' and affect the way citizens relate to themselves as private persons. Rawls's neat distinction between the public role of citizens and their private life as persons is considered implausible (Kymlicka 2002: 233-239).

1.2 Ethical autonomy

Despite Rawls's claim that moral autonomy is 'political not ethical' (1993: 77), it paves the way for the liberal appreciation of a second form of autonomy, i.e. *ethical* autonomy. According to Rawls, politically autonomous citizens regard themselves and their fellow citizens as free persons, who have the power and the right 'to form, revise and rationally pursue a conception of the good' (Rawls 1993: 30).[6] This capacity of ethical autonomy is conditional upon a sense of the good life, and addresses the practical question: what kind of life is worth living, what kind of person do I aspire to be? Early liberals such as Kant and Mill already emphasized the right of individuals to pursue their own happiness. The emphasis was as much on pursuing one's *own* good (vs. universal principles) as on the *good* (vs. the right). Ethical autonomy is similar to what Isaiah Berlin called positive liberty, as mastery of one's own life, 'to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own' (Berlin 1969: 13). Although Kant still suggested that the aims of morality (doing your duty) and happiness (pursuing your desire) are mutually exclusive, moral and ethical autonomy are in fact closely linked, since they are both subject to the principle of self-government. The subject listens to his own reason (or conscience) in setting and obeying the universal law, and listens to his own heart (his desires and emotions) when he pursues his happiness in the way he sees fit (see Waldron 2005).

Still, ethical autonomy is bound to moral limits. As already indicated, Rawls's political liberalism is based on an overlapping consensus between 'reasonable' comprehensive doctrines. The choice to become a committed member of the maffia for instance, however authentic and well-considered, does not qualify as a reasonable option. In the words of Joseph Raz, autonomy counts as a value insofar as it involves a choice among goods: 'a choice between good and evil is not enough' (Raz 1986: 378). Ethical autonomy is therefore constrained by the Millian harm principle, according to which individuals are free to do whatever they wish as long as they do not harm others. But within these boundaries, someone who is ethically autonomous is free to choose her own path in life.

While moral autonomy is a capacity which human beings possess even in the most oppressive circumstances, individuals must dispose of sufficient opportunities in order to exercise ethical autonomy. Society must offer them sufficient meaningful options to choose from. Hence the extent to which

individuals in their personal life can truly exercise ethical autonomy also depends on the amount of civic, political and social rights and liberties they enjoy as citizens.[7]

Liberalism values toleration and plurality. Neutrality of the state vis-à-vis comprehensive doctrines seems the best strategy to generate a plural society. But - I already referred to Kymlicka's doubts - to which extent is such neutrality really possible? Does the value of ethical autonomy not discourage certain conceptions of the good life and support others? Does it not for instance privilege forms of life in which individual life plans take precedence over the goals of a collectivity? Does it not allow more room for citizens who are prepared to put their dearest-held convictions up for discussion than for citizens who do not consider their final ends in any way revisable? And does it not favour the calculating and rational personality type, while disregarding those with a more impetuous temperament? Several scholars take Kymlicka's line of argument to the bolder conclusion that ethical autonomy constitutes the comprehensive or perfectionist core of liberalism. Because liberal-democratic societies have a high regard for autonomy, Joseph Raz thinks that individuals in such societies are only able to flourish by becoming more autonomous (Raz 1986: 394). Moreover, logically speaking, the harm principle does not determine the extent to which the state is justified to curb the autonomy of its citizens. Rather the other way around: what counts as harmful is decided by the extent to which a person's autonomy is violated (400). Therefore the state has more than a mere negative duty to prevent violations of autonomy. It also has the positive duty to encourage and support the autonomy of citizens as 'an essential ingredient of the good life' (415).

The notion of ethical autonomy, however, confronts us with a conundrum. For, what criteria decide when a person is truly exercising ethical autonomy? Ethical autonomy requires that a person is not only independent of undesirable external influences, but also that she is able to withstand internal impulses that keep her from achieving the aims she has set for herself. Ethical autonomy is closely linked with the romantic notion of authenticity, while lacking the connotation of emotional immediacy. A truly autonomous person is someone who is able to rationally reflect upon her first-order desires and hence able to agree with and act according to what her second-order desires, her 'better self', tells her to do. The obvious problem with this distinction is that it projects a false illusion of objectivity. For what criteria decide whether one's conception of one's better self is 'really' better? From which perspective can we judge this? For example: when I am offered a delicious bonbon, my first impulse is to accept it, while my better self tells me to refuse it, because I do not want to become overweight. But is this second-order warning not caused by an undesirable (third-order) identification with the ideal of female beauty canvassed by the Western fashion industry? Because of this problem of infinite regress, and because they cherish the political ideal of value pluralism, most liberals insist that ethical autonomy must be seen as a procedural capacity. Its value remains independent of the actual aims a person has set herself

in life. If push comes to shove, ethical autonomy is first and foremost about living your life 'from the inside' (Kymlicka 2002: 222).

But this is a risky strategy. It leaves little room for social or political criticism of the ways in which individuals choose to live their lives. Whether their lifestyle forms a valuable contribution to society or not, and whether it advances or frustrates their own good, is left to the subject herself to decide. Even the godfather of modern liberalism, John Stuart Mill, hesitates on this account. As Anthony Kwame Appiah demonstrates, Mill valued ethical autonomy ('self-cultivation' or 'individuality') as a means to achieve a particular higher end. He believed that society should cherish individualistic, nonconformist lifestyles and give room to men of genius, because this would be the key to scientific, artistic and cultural progress. But on the other hand, he considered ethical autonomy as a good in itself: it mattered more that a person would lead her *own* life rather than a life that stood out as unique or better (Appiah 2005: 5). Appiah prefers to elaborate the latter idea, which leads to the paradoxical outcome that a person may have an autonomous aspiration to live a life in servitude. Appiah illustrates this by referring to Mr. Stevens, the protagonist of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Everything in Mr. Stevens's life is geared to fulfilling his heartfelt desire to become a perfect butler. A perfect butler puts himself entirely at the service of his master. Mr. Stevens therefore does his utmost to discipline himself to such an extent as to completely discard his own thoughts, emotions and wishes. Appiah makes a convincing case that a life guided by an ethic of service mays not only be fully autonomous, but can also be a life of dignity (Appiah 2005: 11). Gerald Dworkin likewise emphasizes that 'a person who wishes to be restricted in various ways, whether by the disciplne of the monastery, regimentation of the army, or even by coercion, is not, on that account alone, less autonomous' (Dworkin 1988: 18). Appiah and Dworkin thus defend a comprehensive brand of liberalism that is nevertheless open to illiberal conceptions of the good which espouse such 'out-dated' social roles as that of a butler or a nun.

1.3 Personal autonomy

The third and final form of autonomy I would like to distinguish is *personal* autonomy. Personal autonomy is the substantive counterpart of the procedural value of ethical autonomy and the core value of a comprehensive doctrine which I will call radical liberalism. According to this particular conception of the good, 'the aim is to make a life in which you yourself matter most' (Appiah 2005: 15). In radical liberalism, self-cultivation and self-creation are not seen only as the goals of some eccentric geniuses, as Mill did, but as an ideal life-fulfillment for all human beings. This conception of the good propagates an individualistic lifestyle in which everything is geared to realizing one's own talents and dreams. Individuals are assumed to be primarily motivated by the urge to distinguish themselves. The end of such a life is to stand out, to 'make a career'. The relationship with others is a competitive rather than a caring relationship. The only kind of legitimate association are voluntary associations which are established to serve the interests or needs of individuals who may resign their

membership whenever they wish. Less voluntary communities which are constituted through the bonds of family, nation or culture are contemplated with distrust. The appeal to loyalty to one's community should not interfere with a person's individual life plan. Perhaps this 'rather unattractive form of individualism' (which Appiah is certain Mill did not have in mind) is not explicitly defended by any political philosopher. But we seem to approach the hidden perfectionist core of the political doctrine of libertarianism as defended by Robert Nozick, whose conception of self-ownership amounts to an interpretation of individual autonomy in this thick sense.

As Richard Sennett convincingly shows, in our meritocratic, media-governed and late-capitalist society, personal autonomy is swiftly turning into the most privileged form of life. Respect is no longer something to which individuals are entitled on the grounds of their human capacity for (moral and ethical) autonomy alone. Nowadays, respect has to be earned: by developing one's abilities and skills, by being self-sufficient, and by giving back to others. Dependency on others is condemned as waste and parasitism. Individuals who do not manage to live up to this radical ideal (because they are unwilling or incapable), do not count for much. This is the reason why people at the bottom of society experience a fundamental discomfort. They suffer from a lack of respect, which may resentment and anger, 'a desire to avenge' (Sennett 2003).

In modern Western societies, radical liberalism is increasingly perceived as the only reasonable philosophy of the good life. Individuals are expected to conform to one dominant idea of what makes a human life a good and a successful life.

2. Autonomy and gender equality: feminist perspectives

Feminism has always been a complicated project in which the values of gender equality and female autonomy sometimes clashed (Saharso 2000: 38). Ever since Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) feminists have challenged the sexist conviction of Kant and other philosophers that women lacked moral autonomy. They demanded recognition of women as free agents and equal citizens to men. When demanding equal rights for women, however, 20th century feminists realized that one cannot ignore the roles and identities historically ascribed to and adopted by women. The dominant societal order is not gender-neutral, but structurally favours (white, middle-class, etc.) male subjects. Hence, while some feminists gave priority to struggles for equality and inclusion, others scrutinized the fields in which equality was to be achieved and questioned whether this was the kind of equality women should aspire to. For example, rather than demanding the right for women to become soldiers, pacifist feminists argued for the abolition of the military. Instead of asking men to engage in prostitution in order to satisfy the sexual appetites of women, radical feminists demanded that prostitution be banned. And rather than pursue a career and make serious money, socialist feminists advocated a more just redistribution of material and immaterial goods for all. Consequently, feminist struggles for gender *equality* have always been accompanied by struggles for the recognition of female-feminine *difference*. Such projects demanded space for women to speak for

themselves, to find and articulate their 'own' voice. To phrase it in the terms used in the previous section: women demanded the same liberty as men to form and pursue their own conception of the good life, i.e. recognition of their ethical autonomy.

Similar to the struggles for the moral and ethical autonomy of women, those for equality and difference are not opposite but interdependent strategies. Political equality rests upon the recognition of differences, which in turn implies the recognition of the equal value of these differences. As Joan Scott observed, '[t]he history of feminism is the history of women who have only paradoxes to offer' (Scott 1996: 5). [8] Still, the aims of equality and difference do not go together well. Many liberal feminists assume that if women are really free to choose for themselves, they will (should) prefer the same kind of individualistic life trajectory as (Western, middle-class, white) men aspire to. But, as the above examples suggest, thist is not always the case. More critical or radical feminists envision that a difference-oriented approach will transform existing society, particularly the traditional gender roles of men and women.[9] Alas, empirical data suggest that many women neither wish to become the socio-economic equals of men nor seek a feminist transformation of existing relationships. A considerable number of Dutch women, for instance, some of whom identify themselves as feminist, prefer to stay at home in order to care for their children rather than pursue a career. Others claim that they have freely chosen to make their money in the porn-business or in prostitution. The routine response from the side of strict equality thinkers as well as firm believers in sexual difference is that these women are not really acting on their own free will. They cannot exercise their ethical autonomy because society does not yet offer them sufficient opportunities. When pursuing a career, for instance, women in the Netherlands do not only face a still dominant ideology of full-time motherhood and male partners who are reluctant to do their share of the household, but also receive very little governmental support in the form of rights to parental leave and access to affordable day care. Or it is argued that women who (supposedly voluntarily) collaborate in the making of adult movies, or who sell their bodies to offer sexual services, actually have internalized the oppressive and degrading images of women on which these practices thrive.

The problem for radical feminists is that, while the juridical and discursive conditions for women to take control of their own lives have improved, it has become more difficult to ward off reproaches of unjustified paternalism - the more so if these are voiced by the objects of concern themselves. This problem is particularly salient in discussions about multiculturalism and prostitution, which become most vehement when the sexual autonomy of women is at stake.

3. Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the sexual autonomy of Muslim women

As in all Western countries, in the aftermath of September 11 the Netherlands were caught up in intense debates on cultural diversity, the role of Islam and the limits of toleration. Then a young woman caught the eye of the media. Her first public appearance was recalled in a national newspaper as follows:

> *It was a lively debate, where quite different perspectives were put to the fore. But when a philosopher took the stage to relativize away the principles of Enlightenment and really went too far with her ode to multiculturalism, a woman stood up to put her in her place. She spoke Dutch with a mild accent and she was black – in such cases such an audience immediately gets quiet as a mouse. This woman denounced the Dutch philosopher, telling her that she had not the slightest understanding of Islam […] She asked people not to trivialize the seriousness of the current state of Islam, but to criticize it. 'Islam is in need of an Enlightenment. Don't abandon us. Let us have a Voltaire'* (Vink 2002).

In this way the Dutch media discovered and launched a new talent, the Dutch-Somali Ayaan Hirsi Ali. A week later, her first full-page article appeared under the heading 'Do not abandon us. Let us have a Voltaire!' (Hirsi Ali 2006: 35-41). Hirsi Ali argued that Islam constituted a breeding-ground for fundamentalism and terrorism. The Islamic world was a strictly hierarchical world, in which strong anti-semitic feelings raged and everything in life was geared to the hereafter. Islamic law, the *shari'a,* enjoyed priority over all human rules and laws. According to Hirsi Ali, this did not just hold for fundamentalist Muslims. It was inherent to Islam that a believer was not allowed to doubt or criticize. Islam in its current form was therefore incompatible with liberal democracy. The world of Islam urgently needed to pass a phase of Enlightenment. Because there was little chance that such a process would start in the Islamic world itself, Western countries had a duty to support dissident Muslims.

Soon after the publication of this widely discussed article, Hirsi Ali came to play the part of the female Voltaire of Dutch Islam. She made a name for herself by appearing on national radio and television. Disappointed in what she interpreted as the politically correct and overly cautious attitude of the social-democratic party (PvdA) [10], during her first period of hiding from death threats by radical Muslims, she made a spectacular transition to the conservative liberal party (VVD). In January 2002, she was elected a member of the Dutch parliament with 30.000 preferential votes - an impressive number for a young, unexperienced woman who had become known to a wider audience only a few months earlier.

The philosopher who, according to the newspaper article had gone too far in her celebration of multicultural society, was me… Hirsi Ali's intervention that evening put me off balance, but also surprised me: what made her think I had wanted to refuse Islam an Enlightenment? In my lecture, I had put myself in the position of a Moroccan Muslim who had migrated to the Netherlands and who, in his attempt to master the intricacies of the Dutch language, discovered that the Dutch word *heilig* ('sacred' or 'holy') meant something like 'hypocritical'. Apparently, nothing in this culture was considered taboo. And people viewed this as a sign of civilization, of something they called 'Enlightenment'. The source of that enlightenment appeared to be human Reason, from which a

number of principles were inferred, such as the separation between church and state and the freedom of opinion. It gradually dawned upon my protagonist that nothing was sacred anymore for these enlightened spirits – except the principles of Enlightenment themselves. At the end of my talk, I claimed that the crucial question for us should be: 'how to deal with that which we ourselves hold sacred and what is sacred to others?' (Prins 2001). In other words, far from wishing Muslims to stop to think for themselves, I rather interrogated the overly conceited attitude of us, indigenous Dutch.

Hirsi Ali, however, objected that given the fact that Muslims suffer from a lack of freedom and equality within their own community, my relativization of Western values exemplified an inconceivable nonchalance regarding Western achievements, and an even more inconceivable indifference regarding the fate of minorities, especially girls and women, within Islam. What I had considered self-evident, was not self-evident at all.[11]

Since her first public appearance, Hirsi Ali's views on Islam, liberalism and the rights of women have remained remarkably consistent. Like many liberal feminists, she links the feminist pursuit for gender equality and the autonomy of women with the achievements of a liberal society, while rejecting multicultural recognition of differences as an uncritical acceptance of the ways of life of traditional communities, which are detrimental to minorities within those comunities, such as children, women, and homosexuals.

3.1 Autonomy as liberation from Islam

How may one characterize Hirsi Ali's interpretation of liberalism and autonomy in the light of the previous analysis? My first observation is that throughout her discourse, liberalism consistently figures as the positive counterpart of Islam: a Muslim believes in the values of community, a liberal in the autonomy of the individual; a Muslim tends to be fatalistic, a liberal emphasizes individual responsibility; a Muslim obeys to the holy scripture, a liberal follows the constitution. In her autobiography, she mentions her gradual discovery that to be moral, people need not be motivated by the fear of a revengeful God or the prospect of a heavenly hereafter: 'My moral compass was within myself, not in the pages of a sacred book' (2007: 281). Referring to the great philosophers of Western Enlightenment, she professes her belief in the value of moral autonomy by emphasizing the importance of Reason, the obligation to 'think for ourselves' and to take responsibility for our own morality. While in Islam women are less worthy than men, the Western world acknowledges their fundamental equality in all domains of life: political, economic, social and sexual. Human rights are also women's rights. Women consequently deserve unconditional respect as the autonomous sources of morality, and should be treated not as means but as ends in themselves. From this perspective, Hirsi Ali wages war against the oppression of Muslim women, and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, sexual and domestic violence, forced marriages, and honour killing. Western liberals, especially feminists, should be consistent and publicly condemn these practices within immigrant communities rather than tolerate them for fear of further stigmatizing already marginalized people.

Such practices are to be treated as penal offences, liable to punishment no matter whether particular spokespersons (mostly men) defend them as essential to a community's culture or religion. Hirsi Ali praises liberal democracy as a political regime which is undoubtedly superior to other regimes because it puts individual rights and freedoms first.

One of these rights is the right to lead one's life in one's own way, as guaranteed by freedom of conscience, freedom of opinion, freedom of association, etcetera. Hirsi Ali is a staunch defender of *ethical* autonomy, of the freedom to shape and pursue one's own conception of the good and even to retract one's fundamental convictions if one finds them no longer valid. Again she contrasts this with the world of Islam in which criticism, let alone renunciation of his faith by a born Muslim is simply inconceivable and punishable by death. She calls upon Western societies to actively support dissident Muslims like herself who face the wrath of their former fellow-believers. They should actively protect them, by providing them with *de facto* and not merely *de jure* exit options. Such exit options are also of the greatest importance for girls who are oppressed by a suffocating domestic environment or women who are trapped in an abusive relationship. In 'Ten Tips for Muslim Women Who Want to Leave', Hirsi Ali reminds Muslim women that freedom is not identical with being released from all bonds. Taking charge of your own life also requires being able to make well-considered choices, to have a sense of purpose and a fair amount of discipline (Hirsi Ali 2006: 129-140). Hence she subscribes to the view that ethical autonomy does not merely involve freedom from external pressures, but also implies that you are able to control your primary impulses, to focus on long-term life goals and to listen to your 'better self'.

In order to enable individuals to develop such a sense of a better self, Hirsi Ali urged the Dutch government not to stand back, but to encourage and stimulate people to become autonomous, especially through more active interventions in the education of second generation immigrants. As a member of parliament, she for instance took issue with the Dutch system of pillarization by consistently arguing for the abolition of Article 23 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of education by subsidizing denominational schools, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim or otherwise. And she suggested that, in the case of illiterate and underprivileged parents, the state should take charge of the upbringing of their children. The rationale behind these proposals was not so much to mend socio-economic inequalities, but to cultivate a particular kind of personality, to civilize a culturally 'backward' minority. Her source of inspiration for this was the French system of public education, which teaches students that their loyalty lies first and foremost with the nation and the values of the secular, consitutional state, rather than with the articles of a religious creed. Education within a liberal state, according to this view, should provide young people with opportunities to broaden their horizon and acquaint them with a variety of life forms.[12] In line with Joseph Raz's comprehensive conception of liberalism, Hirsi Ali argued for public policies which actively supported institutions and life forms aimed at autonomy, while discouraging institutions and life forms which would produce dependency.

3.2 Liberalism as a new faith

Hence for Hirsi Ali, liberalism is clearly more than a political philosophy. It is also a comprehensive doctrine of the good which would be better for every human being to live by: 'through comparative research I came to only one conlusion: Western democracy offers the best opportunities and chances for the development of a human being into a full-grown, sovereign individual' (Fogteloo 2003: 18). Western culture brings forth 'healthy, balanced and well-educated mothers' and gives men 'the opportunity to develop communication skills necessary for living harmoniously within a family' (Hirsi Ali 2006: 2, 3). The Western world ('the world of reason') is 'simply better' (2007: 348). At one point, she even described her integration into Dutch society in religious terms; as an 'initiation' (*inwijding*) into modernity and claimed she had been 'converted' to democracy (Fogteloo 2003). And explaining why she left the social democrats to join the liberal party, she suggested that justice involved the stimulation of an individualistic life style rather than a focus on the rights of minority groups or communities: 'I have come to realize that social justice begins with the freedom and integrity of the individual. Everything in our society focuses on the individual citizen: you take your exams on your own, you fill in your own tax form, and in court you have to face your sentence alone. Personal responsibility always comes first' (2006: 68). She thereby conveniently ignored the fact that in the Netherlands, as in most other Western welfare states, solidarity with those who are less well-off is institutionalized, such that students who lag behind can get extra help in preparing their exams, poor people may ask advice in filling in their tax forms free of charge, and every citizen who has to appear in court is entitled to a public attorney.

Most important, however, is that liberalism is viewed as the positive alternative for Islam. Thus, she presents her 'fall' from Islamic faith in terms of a conversion: '[…] but recently I was ready. The time had come. I saw that God was an invention' (Hirsi Ali 2006: 76). When she finally dared to read the *Atheist Manifesto* by the Dutch philosopher Herman Philipse[13], she soon 'knew the answer. I had left God behind years ago. I was an atheist […] I felt relief. It felt right. There was no pain, but a real clarity' (2007: 281). Similar to her espousal of liberalism, atheism is far more than a personal view. In her perception, a truly modern (wo)man can only be an atheist: 'I think that most people who call themselves religious are essentially atheist […our (Dutch) prime minister] is forever referring to biblical standards and values […] yet he is an academic, a man who has learned to use well-reasoned arguments to find certain truths. Can he believe that the world was created in six days? […] That simply cannot be true. Scientists are unbelieving. I am convinced that our prime minister is not a Christian' (Hirsi Ali 2006: 79-80).

Hirsi Ali thus confesses her affinity with the radical Spinozist branch of Enlightenment: not only liberalism but atheism also acquires the status of a newly found faith. As in the above quotation, she frequently identifies Islam and Christianity with their most fundamentalist varieties. However, such equations do little justice to the complexity of the Enlightenment heritage. More moderate

Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, Locke, Kant, Mill, whom she presents as her heroes, actually preserved a faith in God. But theirs was no longer the faith as imposed by autorities such as the Holy Scripture, the clergy or the church. It was a faith they subscribed to on the basis of their own rational insights, a faith of their own personal making. The inauguration into modernity for many people in the West has not led to the abolition of religion, but to its displacement and transformation: a displacement from the public to the private sphere, a shift from believing on the authority of others to believing on one's own authority, from the outside to the inside, as it were. A secular society is not the same as an atheist society. If so, atheism would become a new faith imposed from above. Hirsi Ali's penchant for certainty in this respect is peculiarly at odds with the room for doubt liberalism has granted her and which she finds so sorely missing in Islam.[14]

3.3 Personal autonomy as the highest good

While political liberals consider the comprehensive ideal of personal autonomy to be only one of many possible reasonable lifestyles from which free and equal citizens may choose, the radical liberal position represented by Hirsi Ali, inextricably intertwines ethical and personal autonomy. Hirsi Ali assumes that when people truly exercise their ethical autonomy, they will prefer an individualistic lifestyle in which personal autonomy is the most important good. But she is also convinced that personal autonomy is itself a necessary condition for making ethically autonomous choices. As people do not dispose of some innate capacity to choose the form of life which is best for them, such a capacity must be developed through particular modes of upbringing and education. How do these different conceptions of autonomy and liberalism work in concrete cases? Let me briefly present two cases where the relationship between the sexual autonomy of women and the principle of cultural diversity is at stake.

Imagine a well-educated Pakistani-American woman, let's call her Naeema, who whole-heartedly agrees that her parents select a husband for her, because she, as she tells us, has seen too many marriages 'out of love' end in divorce, and because she trusts her parents know what is best for her. Is such a compliance with the institution of arranged marriage proof of the ethical autonomy of this woman? A radical liberal like Hirsi Ali would not take Naeema's word for it. She would for instance object that someone who agrees to her own arranged marriage does not realize that this practice itself is a denial of the autonomy of the partners involved. From a radical liberal perspective, a person's actual behaviour tells us something about the extent to which she is really autonomous. By going along with the traditional customs of her community, Naeema leaves a vital decision such as the choice of a marriage partner to others, and as such she acts against her own best interests. In Hirsi Ali's eyes, Naeema is seriously misled about her own good. Sadly, she does not realize that there is a fair chance that this arranged marriage will not contribute to her future happiness and well-being.

A less comprehensive, more political view of liberalism, on the other hand, would invite a more tolerant approach. Starting from the assumption that Naeema is an adult individual who disposes

of the moral power to form, revise and rationally pursue her own conception of the good, we will be inclined to take her words seriously. Even if we cannot imagine making the same choice as Naeema, we would nevertheless respect it as a conscious and well-informed form of consent to a practice that is customary in the community she is brought up in. From the standpoint of political liberalism, we cannot take someone's behaviour as an indication of her degree of autonomy. Moreover, we would feel that doubting Naeema's capacity for autonomy would constitute a sign of disrespect and a denial of her status as a free and equal citizen. So long as her behaviour is not harmful to others, a liberal society should respect her choice to live in the way she thinks best.

Another case revolves around the all-too-familiar issue of the Islamic headscarf or veil. Hirsi Ali has regularly indicated that Muslim women will only be truly liberated when they remove their veil, thus throwing off the backward views of female sexuality of which the veil is a symbol. However, many young Muslim women in the West claim to wear a headscarf out of their own free will: for religious reasons, because of the greater freedom of movement it gives them, or for identity-politocal reasons ('proud to be Moroccan'). From a political liberal perspective such explanations suffice. Wearing a headscarf is after all quite a harmless custom, and in a liberal society citizens enjoy freedom of religion and are (within the bounds of decency) free to dress as they like. To such claims Hirsi Ali has always responded with a fair amount of scepsis. While emphasizing that Muslim women should be able to choose for themselves, she simultaneously has a clear idea about what that choice needs to be in order to count as really free. In her view, wearing a headscarf cannot possibly be part of a reasonably good life. The veil is imposed upon women in order to guarantee their chastity and to make them invisible for men who would otherwise not be able to control their sexual urges. Restrictions on clothing do not only curb the external but also the 'inner freedom' of women (2006: 22). Hence, to Hirsi Ali it is inconceivable, if not logically impossible, that free and reasonable people can simultaneously submit to the prescriptions of a religious creed.

Accordingly, it appears that a political liberal perspective is better suited to accomodate a multicultural and multi-religious society than a more comprehensive perspective. A thin conception of liberalism is more generous to different forms of life and accepts that some citizens may thrive in an individualistic lifestyle, while others are happier when they can spend their life caring for others or in the service of some higher spiritual goal. Irrespective of whether conceptions of the good are more geared towards modern, traditional or "alternative" lifestyles, they are all equally permissible forms of a good life from a thin liberal perspective. Both libertine and illiberal lifestyles deserve respect. Whether individuals are led by a desire for non-conformity or for community, a liberal society will not interfere as long as they do not inflict harm upon eachother. Within this perspective, radical liberalism counts as one among many reasonable comprehensive doctrines. It is acknowledged that individualism does not automatically lead to a corrosion of character or an erosion of community. People who exclusively

focus on developing their skills and talents, who engage passionately in some form of art or in academic research, often make valuable contributions to society at large. But a purely individualistic life style is inconceivable, if not humanly impossible. There is no human flourishing without networks of close and distant relationships, without daily contacts with loved ones, neighbours, family, friends and/or colleagues. One may adhere to political liberalism as one's political doctrine, one may personally pursue a quite individualistic career, and yet admit that there is a variety of other ways of living well, in which for instance care for the elderly, religious piety or commitment to one's racial community occupy center stage. In other words, one may be aware, as Bhikhu Parekh has phrased it in his radical defense of a philosophy of multiculturalism, that 'Every way of life, however good it may be, entails a loss [which] cannot be measured and compered' (Parekh 2000: 48).

Radical liberals such Hirsi Ali seem to believe, on the other hand, that only their own conception of the good life brings universal happiness. They thereby ignore an essential part of the heritage of the Western Enlightenment which political liberals take far more seriously, which is the ability and will to relativize from time to time even one's most cherished and fundamental truths and values.

4. Sympathetic distrust

However, do radical liberals not have a point when they refuse to take individuals' own accounts of what is good for them at face value? How can we actually know when a life, even our own life, is really lived 'from the inside'? Are not we sometimes mistaken about the true value that our faith or job really has for us? And are we then not grateful if someone helps us to see through our self-deception? In such cases, the adagium of toleration and respect for individual autonomy can become a license to indifference, based on an unreasonable fear of paternalism.

A persevering political liberal would claim that political liberalism prescribes a basic attitude of respect for the autonomy of one's fellow citizens, *unless* there are clear signs that a person is deceiving herself. A radical liberal, on the other hand, would claim that instead of paying individuals *unconditional respect* at all times, it is sometimes better to adopt an attitude of *sympathetic distrust*. Her standpoint is motivated by the awareness that some practices or lifestyles perhaps are not harmful to others, but may be harmful to one self – even if the person involved emphatically denies this. In such cases, sympathetic distrust is preferable to unconditional respect, although we of course need to enter into a contest over the right interpretation of the meaning and quality of the choices a person has made. And, as it always the risk with paternalistic interventions, it can be experienced as extremely offensive, even humiliating, when someone else pretends to know better what is good for you than you know it yourself.

When do liberals have a reason to show sympathetic distrust? First, there are cases where individuals *physically* harm themselves. We call this self-mutilation, as in the case of teenage girls who cut

themselves in order to suppress their inner trials and tribulations. The term itself already indicates that in these cases people should be protected against themselves. We do not consider the person involved fully accountable for her deeds, because no person of sound mind would voluntarily choose to inflict pain upon herself. If we go along with this view, we may quite reasonably conclude that we do not need to respect the request of circumcised women for reinfibulation after child birth. It seems entirely justified, even if adult women ask for it themselves, to paternalistically prohibit performing such a form of genital mutilation (as is currently the case in the Netherlands). But if we follow this line of reasoning, it becomes quite hard to explain why we do not likewise outlaw forms of plastic surgery such as breast enlargement, constriction of the vagina, or excision of the inner labia – which are also performed at the request of women for 'aesthetic' reasons.[15]

The problem becomes thoroughly thorny when we judge that women who defend certain ideas or participate in certain practices are inflicting *psychological* or *emotional* harm on themselves. If, for instance, I do not agree with the opinion of an orthodox Christian that women are unsuitable for political and governmental functions, I can neither respect his wife in so far as she supports this view and hence thinks herself unfit for such jobs.[16] The same goes for a woman who blames herself for her husband's abusive behaviour, a girl who claims she should wear a headscarf because she would otherwise be a walking temptation to men, or a woman who agrees that women should not attend funerals because they are too emotional. From a perspective of sympathetic distrust, women do themselves wrong by cherishing such ideas. They degrade themselves, even if they deny doing this. Such internalizations of negative (sexist) self-images are harmful to a person because they affect her sense of dignity, her self-respect. And even from the ethically thin perspective of political liberalism, self-respect is a non-negotiable value.

Political liberals should therefore admit to radical liberals such as Hirsi Ali that the limits of toleration are located at this very spot.[17] However, radical liberals are mistaken to perceive every choice of a more traditional way of life as a sign of insufficient ethical autonomy. It is not the case that all illiberal views inherently damage women's self respect. When a woman for instances wishes to wear the veil on account of her religious belief, or to show that she is proud to be Moroccan, it is her way to win respect and to enhance her sense of dignity. An arranged (instead of a forced) marriage does not need to conflict with the ethical autonomy of the partners, nor does it necessarily violate their self-respect. Likewise it is perfectly conceivable that a person voluntarily parts with his possesions and gives up his freedom to enter a buddhist or catholic monastery, or that an engaged couple decides to preserve their virginity until their wedding night.

5. The sexual autonomy of the prostitute

The proposed reservation on the liberal value of toleration has serious repercussions for our thinking about how some traditional or religious practices affect the sexual autonomy of women, even if they willingly go along with them. It induces us to problematize customs such as reinfibulation, the cult of

(im)purity surrounding menstruation, or the exclusion of women from religious or governmental offices. But it also forces us to reconsider our views of practices such as pornography and prostitution, which we usually associate with modern, libertine conceptions of the good life. Surely there are women (and men) who enjoy their work as porn stars or prostitutes, who feel they are truly able to express themselves through it. However, there are sufficient reasons to adopt an attitude of sympathetic distrust, knowing that these practices often thrive upon a lack of self-respect of the women involved and on their inability to draw their own limits. In such cases, unconditional respect for autonomy becomes a euphemism for indifference.

In the feminist debate about prostitution, the issue of the sexual autonomy of prostitutes occupies center stage. In the Netherlands, the liberal arguments convinced politicians that legalization of prostitution would enhance the autonomy of prostitutes. Seven years later, all parties agree that it did not work out that way. In the following, I give a short overview oft he positions in the debate. I will argue that an attitude of sympathetic distrust may provide guidelines for a liberal approach of prostitution that does not shun paternalistic state intervention.

5.1 Prostitution as sexual slavery

Since the seventies, radical feminists have denounced prostitution as ‘one of the most graphic examples of men’s domination of women’ (Pateman 1983: 561). According to these critics, the sex industry is structured by deeply ingrained attitudes and values which are oppressive to women (Shrage 1989). Prostitution consists of the exploitation of women by men: prostitutes are extremely vulnerable to violence and abuse, they have to submit to often perverse sexual wishes of customers who do not care about their well-being, and they are forced to hand over a large part of their earnings to their pimp or brothel keeper. For some radical feminists, prostitution is tantamount to sexual slavery. Their call for the prohibition of all forms of prostitution is sometimes referred to as ‘abolitionism’.

Radical feminists claim that no woman engages in prostitution out of free will, since it is by definition impossible to make an autonomous choice for slavery. The good purchased from a prostitute is her own degradation; she is treated as a sexual object, a mere means to satisfy someone else’s needs. Prostitution is not like normal work, and the transaction between a prostitute and her client has nothing to do with a fair bargaining process (Anderson 2002). Admittedly, the Lockean notion of self-ownership ‘allows for the commodification of a person's bodily capacity to labor’ (O’Connell Davidson 2002: 85). But Locke likewise considered the human body as God-given and sacred, which meant that people did not have the right to kill themselves or put themselves in slavery. O’Connell Davidson explains in more detail what the image of prostitution as slavery wishes to convey: ‘*Sex* or *sexual labor* is not exchanged in the prostitution contract. Rather, the client parts with money and/or other material benefits in order to secure powers over the prostitute's person that he (or more rarely she) could not otherwise exercise. He pays in order that he may direct the prostitute to make body orifices available to him, to smile, dance, or dress up for him, to whip, spank, urinate upon, massage,

or masturbate him, to submit to being urinated upon, shackled, or beaten by him, or otherwise act to meet his desires' (O' Connell Davidson 2002:85-86).

Radical feminists also adduce empirical evidence to argue that very few women freely choose to prostitute themselves. Many prostitutes have a personal history of physical and sexual (child) abuse (Vanwesenbeeck 1994: 93), and the majority of women are forced to do the work, either phsyically or as a result of economic need (Hopkins 2005; Schaapman 2007). Even when initially entering the business on their own account, their freedom is relative: once 'in' it is difficult to get out again; most women indicate they rather did different work; and 'as far as the work itself is concerned, it seems that a certain skill in splitting off feelings ("switching off" [*de knop omdraaien*, bp] is a precondition to keep on doing it […] One might even say that dissociative proficiency is a way of professionalism' (Vanwesenbeeck 1994: 107).

It is for these reasons that many radical feminists reject any argument which equates prostitution with other kinds of work in which bodily services are rendered. They also refuse to view prostitution as similar to sex without love or mutual affection: 'the difference is that between the reciprocal expression of desire and unilateral subjection to sexual acts with the consolation of payment: it is the difference for women between freedom and subjection' (Pateman 1983: 563).

Radical feminists are particularly scornful about the suggestion that prostitution is a useful social institution because it prevents sexual frustration and even decreases incidences of rape, by providing men with an opportunity to satisfy their sexual needs in a regulated way. According to Dutch politician Karina Schaapman, 'whore-hopping' (*hoerenlopen*) is sometimes treated as a human (i.e. male) right, based on the assumption that sexual desire is as basic as the need for food. But this is a ridiculous assumption: we do not need sex in order to survive. In a recent pamphlet in which she denounces the 'normalization' of prostitution, Schaapman quotes the Dutch feminist and first female doctor Aletta Jacobs, who at the beginning of the 20th century responded to a gentleman who claimed that prostitution was, alas, a 'necessary evil': 'If that is really your opinion, it is your ethical duty to make your daughter available to serve that aim' (Schaapman 2007a: 6).[18] Schaapman, who is a social-democratic member of the municipal council of Amsterdam provides a graphical description of what it takes, especially for a young girl, to satisfy the sexual need of her clients: 'she irrevocably has to deal with aggression, jealousy, drugs, sickness, rock-hard penetrations and perverse sexual demands. This requires at least a full-grown body, expertise and a strong personality. How many eighteen-year-old prostitutes meet these requirements?'(15).[19]

Radical feminists also argue, finally, that commercial sex is not only damaging to women who sell sex but is harmful to all women. It reinforces the idea that women are or should be sexually available. And in confirming the distinction between 'bad' and 'good' women, it leaves women in our society no other option than to identify with either the image of the whore, who is considered immoral

because sexually loose, or the madonna, who is put on a pedestal because of her chastity while simultaneously being divested of her sexual freedom.

5.2 Prostitution as sex work

Liberal feminists are often no less concerned about the miserable condition of the majority of women who work in the sex industry. But they are convinced that the abolition of prostitution will not improve that situation. When prostitution becomes illegal, their situation would only become worse. The strategy should be exactly the reverse: in order to protect their rights, improve their working conditions and further the sexual autonomy of prostitutes, voluntary prostitution should be recognized as work, as a profession like any other. Prostitutes are not to be regarded as victims of sexual violence and oppression - this only contributes to their stigmatization. Rather, they should be conceived as 'sex workers' who are entitled to the same social and economic rights as other workers. The women's movement should support prostitutes in their struggle for emancipation and empowerment rather than go along with the conservative politics of 'divide and conquer', i.e. distinguish between good and bad women in order to rule over the sexuality of all women. Human rights should be extended towards the rights of prostitutes as a sexual minority. Prostitutes are 'to decide for themselves what they do with their body, hence also to sell sex without being socially ostracized as "bad" women' (quoted in De Vries and Zuidema 2006: 43).[20]

A particularly outspoken plea for the normalization of prostitution is offered by Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1999). Her main point is that, as long as women freely engage in it, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with sex work. She admits that prostitutes actually suffer much harm, and that most women feel forced to do the work because they lack other employment opportunities. But objections by radical feminists that prostitution essentially involves submitting your body to the control of others, or that it is about the invasion of intimate bodily space, are rejected on account that most labour activities are controlled by others, and that there is nothing wrong with having your body invaded so long as it happens with your consent. In order to support these claims, Nussbaum discusses a series of other work activities where bodily services are also rendered, and which we do not find problematic. The list for instance includes the job of a professor in philosophy, who also takes money for work in 'an area of intimate self-expression', namely 'thinking and writing about what she thinks', and whose 'intimate bodily space' is likewise invaded, i.e. by arguments entering her mind (1999: 283, 284). An even more far-fetched comparison involves the job of the 'colonoscopy artist': a hypothetical occupation invented by Nussbaum in order to argue that a job in which a woman would take money for having medical students penetrate her colon for the purpose of research and training, however odd or risky, would not be regarded as immoral. According to Nussbaum, the only reason why we think the invasion of bodily space in prostitution intrinsically wrong, is that it involves *sexual* activity. While radical feminists consider prostitution to be a graphic example of male domination of

women, the liberal feminist standpoint, as voiced by Nussbaum, attributes the *stigma* of prostitution to the male wish to control women. For Nussbaum, the prostitute is 'a sexually active women' who undermines the existing gender hierarchy, and who subverts conservative ideas about female sexuality. The radical feminist explanation of the stigma is insufficient, because 'it is only a small minority of people' (i.e. radical feminist themselves…) who perceive prostitution as illustrative of male supremacy.[21]

5.3 Prostitution as a profession

During the 1980s, the liberal feminist view of female sexuality, pornography and prostitution gradually got the upper hand in the Netherlands. A true feminist was a woman who dared to engage in sexual experiments, and hookers and pornstars were seen as the new vanguard in this struggle for sexual liberation. Critical theorists remarked that in a short period of time, discussions in the women's movement had made a U-turn from critical assessments of the relation between female sexuality and gender hierarchy to a libertine approach which rejected any normative approach of sexuality. They warned that this only meant that new norms had gained the upperhand, while it simultanously had become impossible to challenge these norms without being accused of moralism (Tonkens and Volman 1988). Such warnings were to no avail. The majority of politicians and policy-makers became convinced that the only way to improve the position of prostitutes was legalization: not only would it remove the stigma attached to their work, it would also enable the authorities to tackle problems of public safety historically linked with prostitution such as criminality, violence, trafficking in women, and drugs. The formulation of the new law testified to the intention to support and protect the rights and autonomy of prostitutes. It recognized prostitution as a profession, albeit an exceptional one in which the worker may insist on her right to bodily integrity. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary prostitution is therefore essential: any form of force, violence or deceit is punishable by law, and a prostitute should be able 'under circumstances' to refuse the agreed-upon labour (De Vries and Zuidema 2006: 45). Simultaneously it is important to note that the preceding legislation on public decency (in effect since 1911) did not prohibit prostitution as such (which been legalized since 1811) but the 'soliciting of fornication' (*gelegenheid geven tot ontucht*). In that period, the ban on brothels was supported by feminists like Aletta Jacobs in order to protect prostitutes from exploitation.[22] The 2000 legislation lifted the ban on brothels for the same purpose: to lay down strict rules and regulations for running a legal sex business, so that prostitutes could work in a safe and hygienic environment.

Six years later, the parties involved are beginning to take stock. Everybody agrees that legalization has not (yet) had the hoped-for effects. Currently, between 15.000 and 20.000 prostitutes are estimated to be active in the Netherlands. More than half of them originate from foreign countries. Trafficking in women and illegal prostitution seem to have increased rather than decreased. In the red lights districts

of major cities, illegal women from abroad are kept by pimps who often abuse them. They do not have the courage to go to the police for fear of retaliation. And if they do report their assailants, the Dutch judicial system treats them primarily as illegal migrants rather than victims of sexual abuse. Instead of being offered assistance and counseling, they are deported from the country as soon as they have played their part as witness for the prosecution. Furthermore, the stigma on prostitutes, whether voluntary or not, has not disappeared. Only 5% of active prostitutes have officially registered at the tax department as self-employed workers. Since 2000, about half of the prostitutes left the legal sector in order to work in informal and illegal branches of the sex industry, while technological developments made it easier to go underground. Legal exploiters have difficulty competing with this illegal circuit. Everyone with a mobile phone and an advertisement in a news paper can start an escort-service or a webcam site. These new forms of prostitution are difficult to control. They evade municipal boundaries, and the sex work often takes place in the privacy of a house or a hotel room.

Finally, almost all prostitutes complain about the hardening of the industry. The emergence of websites with extreme porn induces customers to make ever more extreme demands. The average client is interested in cheap, superficial and anonymous sex, and prefers young, unexperienced and obedient women. Schaapman offers quotes from a popular site (www.hookers.nl) where customers rate prostitutes for the quality of their sex services. They show precious little compassion. When a girl complains about pain or behaves passively, she gets a negative review. When she is obviously forced, her customer simply does not care.[23]

The conclusion of Dutch critics of prostitution is that legalization will not help to improve the position of prostitutes. While she does not propose to outlaw brothels, Karina Schaapman argues that as a society we should finally recognize that 'whore-hopping is not normal' and that prostitution will never be a profession in which a person can find true fulfillment. Dutch government should actively discourage boys and men, the (potential) customers, through educating them about minimal standards for proper human interaction, and by raising their awareness that 'certain sexual wishes are not "normal", and that fantasies and desires need not always be realized. Customers should realize the effects of their demand for sex', namely that 'the satisfaction of the need of one person immediately violates the dignity of an other' (Schaapman 2007: 51; 46).

While admitting to the failure of the legalization of prostitution so far, liberal feminists however conclude that rights and regulations remain the best protection against violence and abuse in the sex industry. The abnormalization of customers only adds to the further stigmatization of whores, while criminalization would deprive them of their public voice. Policy measures should therefore be geared to increasing the autonomy of prostitutes by informing them about their rights and by stimulating them to start their own business. Meanwhile, whore-hoppers should become 'critical customers' who visit only *bona fide* brothels (Weijers 2007). One of them sketches her ideal of the sovereign prostitute as

follows: ‘Sex workers who feel confident about their work stand up for their rights, no longer accept exploitation and violence, work independently, determine their own price, refuse ennoying customers, give pimps the sack, expose abuses and in that way will change the sex industry from within’ (Van Doorninck 2006: 17).

However, Dutch liberals are divided on this issue: while representatives of the left-wing GreenLeft party like Van Doorninck insist on the empowerment of prostitutes as strong women who celebrate their sexual autonomy, a recent comment by representatives of the conservative-liberal party (VVD) is less optimistic. Although the authors claim that the state should remain morally neutral and disagree with Schaapman’s proposal that government should spread the message that visiting prostitutes is abnormal, they otherwise fully subscribe to her radical critique: in prostitution the line between voluntary and forced sex work is ‘paper-thin’, as is the line between protection and exploitation by pimps, or between a decent and an abusive customer (Bierens and Richert 2007). They therefore advocate a reconsideration of the ban on pimping (*souteneurschap)*, and advise that boys should be taught that, even though the state does not condemn commercial sex as such, it denies them the right ‘to give full rein to one’s perverse personal desires’. In their interpretation, liberalism considers individual freedom to be the supreme good, as long as it does not violate the freedom of others. This requires that people should behave responsibly and respect the freedom of others. Liberalism must not be confused with a ‘libertine culture’ which identifies freedom with lawlessness. Citing John Locke (“Where there is no law, there is no freedom”), they point out that the ban on the prohibition of brothels should have been accompanied by general procedures in order to regulate the conditions of labour contracts between prostitutes and brothel keepers. These practicalities are now left to the better judgement of local authorities and to negotiations between employers and employees. Thus, the Dutch government hides behind the liberal rationale that the state should remain neutral in matters of private law. The effect is that prostitutes are left to their own devices when they want to enforce the rights to protection they are entitled to (De Vries and Zuidema 2006: 46).

6. Conclusion: cultural diversity and the good of sexuality

In this paper, I have focused on two debates which address the position of categories of women that are usually perceived as entirely different. While Muslim women supposedly subordinate to the most restrictive rules of sexual chastity, the prostitute embodies the libertine image of the loose woman unbound by any sexual restriction. Yet, what these debates have in common is that they both revolve around the sexual autonomy of women. The position of Muslim women is an important topic in debates on multiculturalism, where liberals try to find a balance between the values of cultural diversity and the sexual autonomy of women. In these discussions, there is considerable agreement with a liberal feminist such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, that the collective right of a minority community to preserve its culture or religion should give way in cases where the fundamental rights or the autonomy of its members (in most cases women) are violated. Difficulties arise, however, in deciding what views and practices *count as*

violations of autonomy. A comparison with debates on prostitution in Western societies proves to be enlightening. Radical and liberal feminists agree that women's rights to sexual autonomy are indisputable. But they vehemently disagree about the question what practices enable women to exercise their sexual autonomy: does arranged marriage? Or prostitution? While in multiculturalism the problem is phrased in terms of the tension between the liberal values of sexual autonomy and cultural diversity, debates about prostitution link the problematics of female sexual autonomy to disputes over (morally and ethically) permissable conceptions of the good life.

Evidently, both are sensitive issues among Western feminists. The reason, I suggest, is that they touch upon a question which seems almost improper to ask from the political perspective of liberalism: the question about the good of sexuality itself.

There is no disagreement about the most graphic examples of injustice suffered by Muslim women or prostitutes: forced marriage is as harmful as forced prostitution, abuse by a husband is equally wrong as abuse by a pimp, rape in marriage is just as reprehensible as raping a prostitute, and the modern practice of cutting the labia of American teenagers (I dare to add) is a form of physical mutilation whuch recalls the traditional custom of genital circumcision of little Somali girls. Difficulties arise, however, when adult women appear to choose freely or go along with sexual views or practices which others reasonably assume degrading, harmful or restrictive - such as wearing a chador, consenting to an arranged marriage, asking for reinfibulation, working as a prostitute or participating in pornographic movies. In these cases, it is granted that women should be able to engage in sexual activities when, where and with whom they wish. But it is questioned whether women's consent to these practices are authentic or in their own best interest. Yet, ethical autonomy is not merely about women's first- and second-order desires. It is also about the freedom to follow their desire *given* their conception of the good life - which includes, I would claim, their conception of the good of sexuality. The reasons for sympathetic distrust derive from the fact that we disagree with the conception of the good of sexuality these practices embody. However, we shy away from voicing our disagreement because this would imply that we would have to publicly articulate our own ideas about the good of sexuality. This would mean that we violate the liberal understanding that it is inappropriate to politicize matters of personal ethics, in so far as they fall within the boundaries of what is considered reasonable. In this sense, the adagium of the priority of the right over the good functions as a taboo with politically and morally detrimental effects.

The good of sexuality from a liberal perspective, if I may venture a tentative description, is a good that we should enjoy exclusively for its intrinsic value. Sexuality is to be appreciated as the locus of intimacy, authenticity and joy, irrespective whether it is experienced solo or with a (or more) partner(s), whether it is part of a monogamous love relationship or of a promiscuous life, or whether it involves partners of the opposite or the same sex. The good of sexuality thus understood encapsulates a wide variety of acts and

practices which are dependent on individual sexual desires and phantasies. The only condition for enacting one's desires is that the other person also derives pleasure from it.

On this account, any setting in which sexuality is exchanged for or enacted exclusively to further another good than (mutual) pleasure violates the good of sexuality. This view enables us to articulate our sympathetic distrust vis-à-vis conservative settings in which sexuality is primarily perceived as a means for reproduction or as a site of social honour. But it likewise enables us to question libertine views which perceive sexuality as the unilateral satisfaction of bodily appetites or the mere penetration of one body by another. Sexuality, on this conception, is a good that exceeds the logic of the rational contract which underlies liberal theories of justice. The meaning of the good of sexuality should neither be left to religious, medical or other authorities, nor to the mechanisms of the free market. Sexuality should be regarded as analogous to play rather than to work. If it involves submission and giving up control, it involves surrendering primarily to your own lust and desire, not to that of others. In this conception, it is not the value of sexual autonomy that decides which practices of sexuality are permissible, but the other way around: what counts as sexual autonomy is determined by this conception of sexuality as an intrinsic good.

The obvious objection to this is of course, that it merely reflects our Western modernist view of sexuality. It is claimed that these are constructions of sexuality as the locus of authenticity, spontaneity and self-expression which could just as well have been otherwise. Indeed, they have been otherwise in other historical eras, and they are still otherwise in non-Western cultures. Accordingly, they merely represent the prejudiced ideas of an individualistic Western culture, which is rooted in the heritage of Christian and Romantic notions of the body and the self. Martha Nussbaum's assessment of prostitution represents a paradigmatic example of such criticism. It is remarkable how Nussbaum's relativistic references to the constructed nature of modern experiences of the self and sexuality presuppose a view of what sexuality 'essentially', i.e. stripped of its cultural, social and psychological meanings, amounts to: making use of your body. But of course such a rationalistic account which is fully reminiscent of Marquis de Sade's *Philosophie dans le Boudoir*, is no less embedded in a particular cultural and social context. It too comprises a particular (and thus essentially contested) moral and ethical view of human sexuality. Notably, Nussbaum does not use her relativization of the meaning of sexuality to belittle the problematic situation of the majority of women engaged in prostitution. She emphasizes that the most urgent task is to widen the range of employment options for poor women, so that they do not feel forced to make a living through prostitution. But underlying, the message is that there is a possible world in which 'taking money for the use of one's body' (Nussbaum 1999: 297) might be conceived and experienced as a way of functioning that does not affect human dignity in any way.

Although he likewise suggests that the possibility of a world in which having sex is comparable to just having dinner, is 'a consummation devoutly to be wished', Scott Anderson (2002: 774) argues against Nussbaum that we have to accept that sexuality in our societies happens to be a 'prominent

aspect of our conception of self'. But shrewdly evading the normative question whether this is a good or a bad thing, Anderson criticizes prostitution as an inherently injust institution because 'it helps institutionalize unequal access to sex having such special status, as well as unequal sexual autonomy' (775).

Martha Nussbaum takes issue with the way in which radical feminists 'view the prostitute as they view veiled women, or women in *purdah*: with sympathetic anger, as victims of an unjust system' (Nussbaum 1999: 286). In this paper, I have subscribed to the claim that liberalism as a political theory should cherish the values of individual autonomy and a plurality of conceptions of the good life, and should resist the temptation to reduce liberalism to one particular conception of the good life. But I hope that I have offered convincing arguments why, where the sexual autonomy of women is concerned we must exercise sympathetic distrust with regard to some practices and activities (conservative or libertine) with which women willingly go along, although we have good reason that these practices are harmful to them. In recent debates it is frequently claimed that liberals have allowed themselves to be taken hostage by the ideology of multiculturalism, and have adopted an overly tolerant attitude towards mysogynous practices in illiberal communities under the pretext that it is 'their own culture'. I think we should also be aware of not being taken hostage by libertarian and libertine views which prevent us from facing the exploitation and humiliation of women in the sex industry the under the pretext that it is 'their own choice'.

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Notes

[1] I would like to thank Dick Pels for his exquisite corrections of my English.

[2] See for instance: Wikan 2002, Bellil 2003, Djavan 2004, Amara 2004, Manji 2004, Kelek 2005.

[3] For Dutch book publications, see: Hirsi Ali 2002; 2004.

[4] For English publications, see: Hirsi Ali 2006; 2007. Her work has meanwhile been translated in many languages.

[5] Some radical feminist voices on pornography and prostitution were Kate Millett, Susan Griffin, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon. Some of their most renowned liberal feminist opponents were Gayle Rubin, Carol Vance, Pat Califia and Gail Pheterson.

[6] The dominant usage is to refer to this form of autonomy as personal autonomy. See for instance Joseph Raz who defines personal autonomy as 'the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives' (1986: 369), Kwame Anthony Appiah for whom personal autonomy is 'to actively choose the values and projects you wish to pursue' (2005: 38) or Jeremy Waldron's image of 'a person in charge of his life […] choosing which of his desires to follow' (2005: 307). Gerald Dworkin's definition of autonomy as 'the capacity of persons critically to reflect upon, and then attempt to accept or change, his or her preferences, values and ideals' (Dworkin 1988: 48), seems to cover the same ground, but the lexical priority is reversed: this definition is meant to capture the meaning of the overall concept of autonomy, of which moral autonomy is a particular case. I prefer to go along with Rainer Forst's coinage of ethical autonomy (see Forst 2005), because this form of autonomy is reminiscent of the Greek notion of ethics as the relation of the self to itself, and because I preserve the notion of personal autonomy for a third (more substantive) form of autonomy to be explained later on in the paper.

[7] In the familiar terminology of Berlin: our positive liberty depends on the amount of negative liberty a society provides to its citizens (Berlin 1969). It was Charles Taylor who distinguished these two forms of liberty by typifying negative liberty as an opportunity concept and positive liberty as an exercise concept. Where it must be noted that Taylor embraces a more communitarian perspective on the self, according to which the exercise of (ethical) autonomy is enabled first and foremost by the sources of a society's culture and its shared conception of the good (see Taylor 1979; 1992).

[8] Compare Sandra Harding's observation of the 'contradictory nature' of the feminist project, as 'forced to "speak as" and on behalf of the very notion it criticizes and tries to dismantle – women' (Harding 1993: 59). Or Rosi Braidotti's observation that '[f]eminism is based on the very notion of female identity, which it is historically bound to criticize. Feminist thought rests on a concept that calls for deconstruction and de-essentialization in all of its aspects' (Braidotti 1994: 157).

[9] As I claimed elsewhere, feminist philosophers like Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib and Chantal Mouffe believe that liberal-democratic society offers the best prospects for such a transformative approach (Prins 2005).

[10] Since spring 2001, Hirsi Ali was affiliated to the Wiardi Beckman foundation, the department of scientific research of the PvdA (the Dutch social-democratic party).

[11] My first meeting with Hirsi Ali and her subsequent conquest of the hearts and minds of many Dutch, including some of Holland's most outstanding intellectuals and feminists, incited me to make a serious effort at answering the question which in the afore mentioned article I had merely raised (see for instance Prins 2004; 2005). The current paper can be considered as a further elaboration of my response to feminist critics of multiculturalism such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

[12] According to Mill, individuality was one of the essential ingredients of human well-being. In order to develop individuality, people needed to be free to explore a variety of different life situations (Mill 1972: 116).

[13] This *Atheïstisch Manifest* was first published in 1995. In 2004, a second and updated edition appeared, accompanied by a preface by Hirsi Ali.

[14] Several Dutch commentators have pointed out an internal contradiction in Hirsi Ali´s views on Enlightenment and religion. According to one of them, Hirsi Ali expressed her 'passionate love for secular society in precisely the terms [of unconditional ties and an imperative monoculture, bp] which are alien to it' (De Jong 2003). Another described Hirsi Ali and her adherents as 'atheist Enlightenment fundamentalists', who, craving for certainty, started a true 'jihad against maladjustment´ (Van den Linde (2003)). After reading Hirsi Ali's first book *De zoontjesfabriek*, feminist historian Jolanda Withuis concluded: 'Hirsi Ali writes with the understandable anger of someone who just escaped from a religious sect, and with the enthusiasm, but also the absolute certainty [*rechtlijnigheid*, which could also be translated with straightforwardness, but has a more pejorative connotation] of the fresh convert' (Withuis 2002). And according to theologian Manuela Kalsky, just like the conservative Muslims she challenges, Hirsi Ali takes religion to be a matter of fundamental religious conviction rather than a matter of textual interpretation of Bible or Koran (Kalsky 2003).

[15] A documentary by Dutch film maker Sunny Bergman, *Beperkt houdbaar* [Perishable], broadcast on national television on May 8 2007, sketches a disconcerting picture of Western women who are willing to undergo (and pay huge amounts of money for) plastic surgery in order to get the so-called 'Playboy look' - the new ideal of female beauty, set by the photoshopped images of porn-stars, who themselves already are the products of elaborate plastic surgery. The film elicited much discussion in the Netherlands about the emergence of a 'bimbo culture', a discussion which is currently propelled forth further by extensive media attention for the Dutch translation of Ariel Levy's book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (Levy 2005).

[16] This is a reference to the ideas of an actual existing Dutch political party, the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP), which has two seats in parliament.

[17] One could of course also argue that conceptions of the good which are harmful to self should no less count as reasonable and permissible as do conceptions which are harmful to others.
[18] 'Indien dat werkelijk uwe meening is, zijt ge zeedelijk verplicht uw dochter voor dit doel beschikbaar te stellen' (cited in Schaapman 2007: 6).
[19] As a young woman, Schaapman worked as a prostitute in the Amsterdam Red Lights District herself. In her autobiography, she explains how she got into it more or less by chance, although the death of her mother when she was thirteen and her flight from an abusive father obviously played a role (Schaapman 2007b).
[20] As part of the attempt to normalize prostitution, on March 31 2007 several brothels, sex theaters and window prostitutes in the Red Lights District in Amsterdam opened their doors for the wider public. The liberal feminist solidarity with prostitutes was nicely illustrated that day by the unveiling of statue, initiated by the Prostitution Information Center, representing the prostitute as a strong and proud woman (called 'Belle'). The statue is dedicated to prostitutes all over the world.
[21] I cannot help noticing that the fact that it is only a minority of people who hold a certain view seems quite an awkward reason for rejecting that view, especially because the standpoint which Nussbaum herself elaborates in this article against what she deems an 'irrational' view of sexuality, will be subscribed to by an even smaller minority of rationalistic libertines.
[22] Aletta Jacobs's argument against the state regulation of prostitution and in favour of the prohibition of brothels, shows remarkable similarities to Karina Schaapman's essay more than a century later (see Jacobs 1899).
[23] This information is gathered from Raymond 2003, Hopkins 2005, Schaapman 2007.